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ABSTRACT

Traditional employment often excludes those individuals with severe and moderate mental retardation. This paper describes three strategies that can be used by employment specialists and one strategy that can be used by job coaches in obtaining and maintaining employment for mentally retarded adults, using the supported competitive employment model. Each strategy includes a rationale and is illustrated with an example. Strategies include the following: (1) determine if there are obstacles/barriers in the way of the mentally retarded worker finding employment; (2) determine the abilities of the mentally retarded worker and match these with an appropriate job; (3) locate cooperative employers, address their fears and concerns, and highlight the successes of mentally retarded workers; and (4) determine the amount of intervention time and follow-along services required by the mentally retarded worker. Includes eight references. (JDD)

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Helping Moderately and Severely Mentally Retarded Adults Participate in Competitive Employment Situations

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Running head: HELPING MODERATELY AND SEVERELY MENTALLY RETARDED

Helping Moderately, and Severely Mentally Retarded Adults Participate in Competitive Employment Situations.

Moderately, and severely mentally retarded individuals seeking employment, encounter difficulties when faced with a hesitant employer. Many employers are unaware of the vocational abilities of the mentally retarded. They fear the possibility of negative reactions, non-acceptance by fellow workers, and there is a belief that mentally retarded persons are more prone to job related injuries. These misconceptions held by potential employers are caused by misinformation and a lack of information. In addition to the issue of information, there seems to be a general unwillingness to understand or become acquainted with persons who are mentally retarded. To help educate employers about mentally retarded persons, the mass media must provide more information concerning their abilities, and the contributions they are capable of providing. In addition to media information, there is a need for the distribution of information concerning their vocational skills to the various agencies, firms, and companies where positions appropriate for mentally retarded persons exist. The most important factor in informing employers about mentally retarded persons is the need for trained professional employment specialists and job coaches to aide in the hiring and adjustment processes, through intervention and counseling.

Employment specialists and job coaches play a crucial role in improving the attitudes of employers. An employment specialist has many duties. The first duty is to determine if there are any obstacles in the way of the mentally retarded worker in obtaining employment. Obstacles may include motivation to work, vocational goals, transportation skills, communication skills, and medical condition(s). The employment specialist must also determine the vocational abilities of the mentally retarded worker and match those abilities with an appropriate job. The employment specialist can determine vocational skills from referrals and agencies. Through personal interviews, the employment specialist can discover the likes and dislikes of the individual client. Finally, the employment specialist must locate cooperative employers and highlight the successes of other mentally retarded workers. Above all, the employment specialist must have a strong commitment to the belief that mentally retarded persons are valuable

employees (Goodall, Wehman, & Cleveland, 1983, pp. 272-275). The job coach provides vocational intervention at the job site. Intervention may include completing parts of the job for the client for several weeks and addressing transportation needs. The job coach must also work closely with the employer and provide support to the employer. Developing early and ongoing communication with parents/guardians is an important role of the job coach. The job coach provides permanent follow-along support throughout the mentally retarded workers employment (Wehman, Hill, Wood & Parent, 1987, pp. 12 & 15).

The purpose of this article is to describe three strategies that can be used by employment specialist and one strategy that can be used by job coaches in obtaining and maintaining employment for mentally retarded adults. For each strategy discussed, a rationale is provided and then illustrated with an example. It is not assumed that the reader is aware of the terminology used in this article. Job coaches and employment specialists are the two main personnel involved in supported competitive employment. A job coach assists in the initial training and adjustment of workers; they teach strategies to enhance satisfactory work habits and provide follow-along services throughout the worker's employment. An employment specialist makes important decisions concerning job matching, workers' abilities, employers' attitudes, and degree of cooperativeness, if there are any obstacles in the path (Goodall, Wehman, & Cleveland, 1983, p. 276), and how much follow-along services are required. Competitive employment is work for minimum wage in a predominantly non-handicapped work situation (Wehman, Hill, Wood, & Parent, 1987, p. 12). Supported competitive employment is paid work with supervision, occurring in an integrated work environment, for persons with severe handicaps and a demonstrated inability to obtain and maintain employment (Wehman, 1988, p. 357). Intervention time is any and all activities executed by an employment specialist or job coach that enables the mentally retarded individual to achieve successful employment. Intervention time duties may involve the following: transportation skills training, direct job skills training, instructional program development, communication with parents/guardians and agency representatives, and advocacy on behalf of the mentally retarded

worker with job site personnel (Kregel, Hill, & Banks, 1988, p. 201).

Strategy 1: To determine if there are obstacles/barriers int he way of the mentally retarded worker finding employment.

Rationale. Employment specialists must determine if there are any obstacles standing in the path of the mentally retarded worker finding employment. They must investigate the mentally retarded person's motivation to work, vocational goals, transportation skills, communication skills and medical condition(s). These are several of the factors critical to the employment success of mentally retarded persons (Goodall, Wehman, & Cleveland, 1983, p. 276). Gersten, Crowell, and Bellamy (1986) reported that working for wages has a positive result on independent living skills and social behavior. The mentally retarded workers who showed the greatest job success also showed improvement in independence, social behavior and perceived competence (Inge, Hill, Banks, Wehman, & Shafer, 1988, p. 98). Social behavior has been shown to be a reason for job termination among mentally retarded workers (Wehman, Hill, Wood, & Parent, 1987, p. 16). Parental support and expectations are an important factor in job success of mentally retarded workers. Although there is a demonstrated ability of mentally retarded persons to achieve success in employment, parents and guardians seem to have disturbingly low expectations for vocational opportunities. The support and involvement of parents and guardians has been shown to have a positive effect on the mentally retarded person's job success (Turnbull & Turnbull, III, 1988, p. 337).

Example. A mentally retarded adult is seeking employment. The employment specialist or placement counselor must first examine the individual's motivation to work and/or vocational goals. This information is critical in determining what type of placement will be appropriate. Limited transportation skills due to a physical handicap require a placement nearby. Communication skills and social behavior are critical components in job success. Obviously a client with limited communication skills should not be placed in a public relations position or one that requires telephone usage. Social behavior is important in any job, but is especially important in one that requires working closely with co-workers

frequently. Positive social behavior can be enhanced through counseling and/or behavioral rehearsal. The more extensive a repertoire of positive and productive social behaviors a person has, the more likely he/she will attain job success. Degree of parental support is also an important factor. An individual with a supportive family is more likely to achieve job satisfaction which is more likely to lead to job success. As the employment specialist works at the job site, he/she is also acting as a role model for co-workers who may not know how to interact with mentally retarded persons.

Strategy 2: To determine the abilities of the mentally retarded worker and then match these with an appropriate job.

Rationale: Matching a job with the abilities of a client is not an easy task. Proper job matching is very important to the success of any employee, but is especially important for the mentally retarded employee. Slow work speed, poor endurance, and unacceptable work quality were noted as major work problems by employers (Wehman, Hill, Wood, & Parent, 1987, p. 13). Job matching requires skilled, experienced employment specialists who consider factors such as production rate demands, social interaction skills required, and the opportunity for modification (Kregel, Hill & Banks, 1988, p. 207). Group counseling that focuses on vocational skills and behaviors, can transfer work-appropriate behaviors to various work sites (Humes & Suggs, 1988, p. 33). The employment specialist must thoroughly investigate specific job skills and expectations and find a job that matches the mentally retarded individual's skills and abilities. Job skills may involve ability to work with numbers, ability to read and write proficiently, telephone usage, job interview skills, conversational skills, competitive and cooperative behaviors, question-asking, self-disclosure, and self-monitoring of behavior (Schloss & Schloss, 1985, p. 271).

Example. To assess the abilities of a mentally retarded person, the employment specialist must become acquainted with how quickly the individual is able to complete tasks. If the individual is slow to complete tasks and does not work well under pressure or when timed, a placement in a fast food restaurant would not be appropriate. If the individual is able to read, write, alphabetize, and work with

numbers, and is interested in working with children, a placement in the youth services section at a library or bookstore might work out well. If the individual possesses self-monitoring skills and question-asking skills, he/she may eventually become eligible for advancement. Group counseling and continued job skills training can aide the individual in acquiring new skills and the ability to successfully handle more responsibilities. Working in a library or bookstore requires a certain degree of communicative skills. The worker must be able to effectively answer questions and refer persons to their superiors if problems arise. The worker must be able to effectively convey information and directions and have the capacity to learn the particular classifying systems and filing systems of the library or bookstore. There are many skills involved in any job. It is the job of the employment specialist to properly assess these expectations and match them with the abilities of the mentally retarded individual seeking employment. An individual whose abilities have been well matched with job expectations will achieve a greater degree of job success than an individual whose abilities are not well matched with job skill expectations.

Strategy 3: To locate cooperative employers, address their fears and concerns, and highlight the successes of mentally retarded workers.

Rationale: A major problem encountered by the employment specialist is location of cooperative employers and re-educating hesitant employers about the worth of handicapped and mentally retarded workers (Goodall, Wehman, & Cleveland, 1983, p. 275). The employment specialist must be prepared to encounter misconceptions, negative views, and stereotypical views held by the employer. They must also address the employer's fears and concerns in regard to hiring a mentally retarded worker. To do this the employment specialist needs to provide facts concerning the job success of mentally retarded workers. One study reports the success of twenty one mentally retarded workers with an IQ range of twenty four to thirty nine, who were placed in supported competitive employment. The total cost of services for these individuals was $107,000 dollars. While their cumulative earnings were over $231,000 dollars, indicating the profit margin and significance of these individuals as valuable workers (Wehman, Hill, Wood, & Parent, 1987, pp. 13 & 15). This data demonstrates the capability of these individuals to

succeed in supported competitive employment, provided there is appropriate professional intervention and support. The employment specialist can, and should, bring to the attention of the employer, many examples of successful supported competitive employment. Several other states have implemented this model with great success. For example, Colorado state reports that in 1985 there were 123 disabled/handicapped persons placed into supported competitive employment, and in 1987 the total had increased to 909 persons. Virginia state has experienced success with this model for a number of years. In this state, 1,081 individuals have been placed into supported competitive employment, with cumulative earnings amounting to 5.8 million dollars (Wehman, 1988, p. 358). Mentally retarded workers have, and will continue, to contribute to the economic system as long as they are allowed to participate in it. All persons, especially those working closely with mentally retarded persons, must feel a strong commitment to their inherent worth as human beings and as valuable employees.

Example. In locating a cooperative employer, the employment specialist must be prepared to do extensive telephone and foot work. They must first screen prospective employers through telephone usage. If an employer sounds not only hesitant but also negative, this will probably not be an appropriate environment for supported competitive employment to take place. An employer who is hesitant can be encouraged to learn about the successful employment of mentally retarded individuals. After locating a cooperative employer, the next task is to attain a clear and thorough understanding of the job skills required and any related expectations (dress-code, last minute availability and filling in or doing work for others). With a complete understanding of the job requirements, the employment specialist can decide if it is appropriate to actually meet with the employer at the job site to determine the degree of environmental flexibility. For example, if the worker is wheelchair bound, perhaps appliances and light switches can be lowered to accommodate the worker. These types of alterations must be discussed with the employer in order for the employment specialist to determine if the degree of flexibility will be adequate for the worker. Locating a cooperative employer is a difficult task that requires a substantial amount of time and effort from the employment specialist. It also requires commitment in the belief that

mentally retarded persons can be valuable employees.

Strategy 4. To determine the amount of intervention time and follow-along services required by mentally retarded workers.

Rationale. The job coach or trainer-advocate is responsible for determining the amount of intervention time needed. Determining the amount of intervention time and/or follow-along services required by each mentally retarded worker is necessary in calculating the cost of services for any length of time. A study of 51 persons previously considered "too handicapped" to work, showed successful results when placed into supported competitive employment. An average of 161 hours of intervention time was provided in the first year. About half of the intervention time was provided in the first month, after which, intervention time leveled off to less than one hour per week after twelve weeks (Kregel, Hill & Banks, 1988, p. 203). It is clear that mentally retarded individuals require a substantial amount of intervention time in the initial stages of employment, but that it drops to almost nothing after about three months. Intervention time is not fixed, it varies with the individual. Job intervention time must be determined according to the mentally retarded worker's individual needs. The level of functioning of the mentally retarded individual does not have a significant bearing on the amount of intervention time. There was no significant difference found in the intervention time between those previously labeled moderately or severely mentally retarded and those previously labeled borderline or mildly mentally retarded (Kregel, Hill & Banks, 1988, p. 204). Even when discussing a specific category of mental retardation, individuals within this category will vary greatly concerning the amount of intervention time required.

Example. Ellen is employed in a greeting card shop. She works about twenty hours per week as a stockperson. She will need close to twenty hours per week of intervention time for the first several weeks. The job coach will have to travel with her to work and make sure she has the necessary transportation skills. The job coach will help her understand the job requirements. Requirements may include helping her learn the categorizing system used by this particular store and then systematically

going through all the steps involved in properly placing cards on the shelves. The job coach needs to monitor how much time Ellen needs to complete tasks and help her find ways to finish them within satisfactory time periods. The employer must be consulted concerning all provisions and alterations made for Ellen. The job coach will need to be in close contact with the employer and establish open communication lines between Ellen and her employer. All those tasks require much time and effort from the job coach. Much of this time is spent in activities other than direct job skills training. The job coach must be prepared to work closely with the employer and Ellen at the job site. As Ellen becomes able to handle the work independently, intervention time will decrease accordingly. Eventually, the amount of intervention time will total less than a couple of hours per week.

Conclusion

Traditional employment often excludes those individuals with severe and moderate mental retardation. The strategies suggested in this article provide guidelines for employment specialists and job coaches implementing the supported competitive employment model. While the examples are directed at moderately and severely mentally retarded adults, the principles can be applied when finding work for adults with moderate and severe disabilities or handicaps including persons who are wheelchair bound, visually or hearing impaired. There is no miracle formula for individuals seeking employment. However, these four strategies can help professionals who are trying to obtain and maintain integrated employment for moderately and severely mentally retarded adults in a supported environment. There are many beneficial aspects of the supported competitive employment model. It provides opportunities for mentally retarded individuals to interact with non-handicapped persons, to earn decent wages, pay taxes,a nd to establish a work history for eventual advancement. It also encourages their families, friends, and others to view them in a competent role. Promoting a positive attitude toward persons with mental retardation is an important role for the professional to fulfill. More importantly, encouraging and fostering this positive attitude should be a societal goal.

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